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SUBJECT: VENEZUELA REFERENDUM: RECALL OR RATIFICATION

Classified By: Political Counselor Abelardo A. Arias for reason 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Before a multitude of supporters June 6, President Hugo Chavez morphed the recall referendum sought by his opponents into a referendum to ratify his mandate. He called on his supporters to help him once again defeat the enemies of the Bolivarian revolution who would deprive them of the social programs Chavez has started. Chavez's shift is important as the National Electoral Council, grappling with the questions of when the referendum will be and whether the process will be manual or electronic, also debates the formulation of the referendum question. While the President has strategically gone into full campaign mode, his opponents focus on tactical battles, and relegate matters such as identifying their leading candidate to a second level. End Summary.

2. (U) President Hugo Chavez, having accepted that the preliminary results of the appeals process indicated that there would be a recall referendum, convoked a rally in Caracas June 6. Addressing the hundreds of thousands of supporters bused in from around the country, Chavez said he was pleased that the opposition had opted for a peaceful, constitutional route and called on his opponents to reject violence and refrain from seeking international intervention. Denying that "we" had suffered a defeat, the President mocked the opposition's claim to victory, alleging that it was already considering dismantling the revolution's social programs, privatizing the state oil company and to reinstate military coup-plotters into the armed forces.

3. (U) Chavez called the referendum -- not once using the word recall, instead referring to it as national or ratification -- perhaps the best thing that could happen to Venezuelans because the "oligarchy" would now stop its whimpering. Accepting it as "one more challenge," he warned the opposition "and its foreign masters" to prepare for a defeat that "will be indelibly written in the history of the 21st century." Chavez told his supporters to prepare for 60 days of hard campaigning and set their goal at obtaining more than twice the vote that brought Chavez to office.

What's the date?

4. (U) Chavez told the crowd he did not care whether the National Electoral Council (CNE) set August 8 or August 15 as the date for the referendum. Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel and other leading Chavez allies have come out in favor of the later date. CNE director Jorge Rodriguez has told reporters he favors the August 15 date because the Council needs the additional time for preparations. The CNE is expected to set the date when results are announced June 8.

5. (U) Opposition leaders across the board are insisting on the August 8 date. Miranda State Gov. Enrique Mendoza told reporters June 7 that they expect the CNE to honor a verbal commitment made to them by CNE director Jorge Rodriguez during the appeals process negotiations. Mendoza said August 8 is key because, should any problems arise, Venezuelans would have one more Sunday at their disposal to hold the referendum before August 19. Chavez opponents also fear that the Gov may employ legal maneuvering, such as seeking distinction between when the voting occurred and when official results are in, to deny them new elections. (Note: If a successful recall referendum occurs after August 19, there are no new presidential elections and the Vice President would assume office.)

Machines: Why Worry?

6. (U) Another point of contention before the CNE is whether to conduct the referendum with paper ballots or use

electronic machines. CNE director Rodriguez, who had a leading role in obtaining the contract for the new machines to be used, cites the electoral law as the reason for going the computer route. VP Rangel and other Chavez supporters have also flatly taken the side of computerized voting. Fifth Republic Movement deputy Luis Tascon asserted that using computers guarantees transparency in the process and charged that the opposition insists on paper ballots so it can commit fraud.

17. (U) Conversely, the opposition believes the GoV insists on using the computers so it will be able to commit fraud. Among the reasons Chavez opponents cite is the partial GoV ownership (28% according to the Miami Herald) of the consortium that has the contract for the machines; all the machines needed for the vote have yet to be delivered; and the software for them has yet to be written. Additionally, there is concern about possible manipulations and electronic fraud and Venezuelans' lack of familiarity with the machines.

18. (C) CNE director Ezequiel Zamora, who opposes using the new machines for the referendum, argues that this is not time to try out a new system. He noted, for example, that the infrastructure -- electricity and telephony -- is not the same in other parts of the country as it may be in the capital. Carter Center representative Francisco Diez told the Ambassador that the computerization of the referendum should not be so problematic. They had seen a demonstration of the machines, Diez said, and the electoral expert working for the consortium (we presume this is a former IFES consultant) is favorably known to them. Each machine has built-in UPS to keep it functioning if power fails, and can transmit results by cellphone or satellite if hard lines fail.

Fighting for the "Yes"

19. (U) Another point of contention before the CNE is the formulation of the question for the referendum. Having invested more than a year on a "yes" vote, the Opposition favors a question that calls for an affirmative answer, i.e., "Do you agree with revoking the mandate of the President of the Republic?" Chavez, however, turned the tables June 6 when he made the recall referendum a ratification referendum. The question his supporters favor is "Are you in favor of President Chavez concluding his term?" There is as yet no definition of when the CNE has to decide on the language of the question. The later that the decision comes in the next two months, assuming that it will be formulated in favor of the GoV, the more difficult it will be for the Opposition's campaign.

Comment

10. (C) While President has gone into full campaign mode, the Opposition battles tactically over questions such as the date, computerization or the language in the question to be put before the voters. Matters such as who would be the opposition candidate -- or for that matter, how many -- are temporarily relegated to secondary attention. Fortunately for the opposition, solutions to at least two of the three predominant issues appear to be in the offing. Devoting energies to a larger, strategic vision of how to approach the referendum and the campaign to go along with it are a must that the Opposition can ill afford to delay.
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